

Fall 1993

A Sampling of Some Special Collections

La Salle University Art Museum

Caroline Wistar

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Introduction

The La Salle University Museum has several thousand art works in eight special collections which for conservation considerations and severe space limitations we are not able to keep on permanent exhibition. During the fall semester we have, as part of two special exhibitions, the opportunity to view samples from five of these collections. In the 20th century gallery, Indian miniatures, Japanese 19th and 20th century prints, and African Tribal Art are on exhibition. In the hall book cases and the special exhibition room samples from the Susan Dunleavy Collection of Biblical Literature (750 objects) and the Portrait Print Collection (350 objects) are on display. The other three areas of special collections not on exhibition today are Ancient Greek Terra-cotta Vases and Figurines, Prints (15th-20th centuries) and Drawings and Watercolors (15th-20th centuries)--though we had exhibitions from these collections last year.

Selections from all of these special collections can be made available to you for individual viewing and/or use in classes held in the museum, with several days notice.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

INDIAN MINIATURES

Most of La Salle's collection of 111 Indian miniature paintings were donated to the museum by Dr. Alvin Bellak. Dr. Bellak has one of the finest private collections of Indian miniature painting in the area. The miniatures he gave to us are from the 17th-19th centuries--the period when the Mughal and then the British Empire held sway over most of the princely, feudal states that made up India. The geographical diversity of these Indian states accounted for the growth of distinct schools of native painting (referred to as Rajput painting). However, the Mughal conquerors also brought with them their own style and developed in India a synthesis of Persian miniature painting and Rajput painting. Themes common to both of these detailed and delicate miniature styles were portraits of rulers and courtesans and the every day pleasures and adventures of the court: ceremonies, hunts, battles, love making and musical entertainment--works of art for the contemplation and enjoyment of the nobility. The predominant themes in Indian Rajput painting were related to Hindu culture: love poetry, musical modes and the imaginative and exotic exploits of the gods (especially Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) and their numerous incarnations. Artists were anonymous craftsmen working in the court workshops of their chief patrons--

the Indian princes (Rajas) and imperial rulers of the Mughal Empire.

The medium here is gouache (watercolor mixed with gum arabic to make the mineral pigments opaque). For origins, the principal area of India is listed first followed by the provincial school within the area.

- 1 Rajasthan, Jaipur School, late 18th century
A Lady Converses with Two Princes as They Eat a Meal, Seated on a Palace Terrace
- 2 Rajasthan, Mewar School, late 17th century
Krishna and Two Ladies in a Palace Interior
- 3 Punjab Hills, Knagra, early 19th century
"Visit to a Holy Man"
Scene from the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*
- 4 Rajasthan, Bikaner School, c. 1750-75
The Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (ruled 1627-1658) Seated on a Throne While Three Ladies of the Court Pay Their Respects
- 5 Mughal, probably painted at Delhi, c. 1740
The Persian Emperor Nadir Shah Holding a Sword, Seated on a Carpet on a Garden Terrace

JAPANESE PRINT COLLECTION

The tradition of graphic arts in Japan (especially the color woodcut, which makes up the majority of La Salle's collection) is a long, rich and distinctive one. We are fortunate to have a collection of 120 classical color woodcuts, referred to as "Ukiyo-e" (floating world) prints from the last quarter of the 19th century. They were generously donated by La Salle's major patron of 20th century art, Benjamin D. Bernstein. They reveal bold flat decorative patterns, exquisite design, subtle gradation of color harmonies, and refined but complex method of execution and printing. All of these qualities later influenced Western Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists. The subject matter was confined to Japanese figurative scenes of everyday life--essentially the courtesans, lovers, geisha and bathhouse girls who patronized and serviced the city pleasure districts and the actors in the popular Kabuki Theater.

La Salle is also fortunate to have a small collection of modern and contemporary Japanese prints to compare with the classical style. Japanese artists of these prints were clearly influenced by the West as well as the East and their works may be considered international in style and content, whether of an abstract or representational nature. The abstract images which

appear to dominate the Japanese contemporary print, embody a contemplative, serene, poetic but controlled expression--the very essence of the traditional Japanese spirit of Zen.

These Japanese prints are a valuable resource for the Asian Studies program, including the Japanese Tea Ceremony courses at La Salle and for all students seeking an introduction to Japanese cultural arts of the past and the present.

All of the prints are color woodcuts. The 19th century pieces list the artist only.

6 Utagawa Kunisada [Toyokuni III] (1796-1864)

7 Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900)

8 Utagawa Kunitera (1808-1876)

9 Matsumoto Akira (Contemporary)

Gogai ga Deta 1964

10 Hideo Higiyara (b. 1913-)

Germination #5 1965

AFRICAN TRIBAL ART

Our small collection of African tribal art, consisting primarily of masks and implements, was the bequest of Margaret Webster Plass in 1989. Mrs. Plass was one of the first Americans seriously to research and collect African art. She began while living in Zaire (the former Belgium Congo), where her husband was employed during the 1940s. She donated her major collection to the British Museum in 1952, but the African art she kept in her home she willed to La Salle University and to her alma mater, Bryn Mawr College.

The objects in the collection were made by skilled and trained craftsmen from sub-Saharan, West and Central Africa. They embody an art which is highly sophisticated, and expressive, conceptual and subjective. The expressive potential and unified structure of this tribal art, its bold patterns, and simplified geometric shapes inspired Western Post-Impressionist and Modern artists, especially the Cubist painters. As most African tribes have no written language, their intuitive art, along with their oral tradition, was the chief means through which they expressed and supported the spiritual values needed to sustain their communities.

The ancestor, cult and fetish figures and masks of African tribal sculpture in this collection were produced to ward off evil and to invoke or honor the spirit and power of a particular deity or ancestor. They were used in village rituals and reflected the pantheon of gods belonging to the various cults and societies of each tribe. In general this collection provides us with an invaluable window into the mystery, magic and rich complexity of African tribal society and our African-American heritage.

All of the objects are carved in wood unless otherwise mentioned. Where known, the tribe and the country from which the object comes is listed. Most of the pieces probably date from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century and come from sub-Saharan West and Central Africa, areas dominated by the Negro and Bantu speaking tribes (see map).

11 Spoon

Guro, Ivory Coast

12 Mask

Yoruba, Nigeria

- 13 Mask
 Baule, Ivory Coast
- 14 Bone Horn
 Congo, Angola
- 15 Mask
 Igbo, Nigeria
- 16 Ladle
 Guro, Ivory Coast ?
- 17 Mask
 Pende, Zaire
- 18 Mask
 Dan-Ngere, Ivory Coast
- 19 Ladle
 Guro, Ivory Coast

20 Akuba Fertility Doll

Ashanti, Ghana

Worn in the waistband of women and girls to insure fertility and beautiful children.

21 Mask

Ogboni ?

22 Whistle

Origin unknown